

Working when sick

How workplace regulations and culture will impact the post-pandemic recovery

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The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

The Diversity Institute conducts and coordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by underrepresented groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results. The Diversity Institute is a research lead for the Future Skills Centre.

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.



About the Survey on Employment and Skills

The Survey on Employment and Skills is conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre and the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University. In early 2020, the Survey on Employment and Skills began as a project designed to explore Canadians' experiences with the changing nature of work, including technology-driven disruptions, increasing insecurity and shifting skills requirements. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was expanded to investigate the impact of the crisis on Canadians' employment, earnings and work environments. A second wave of the survey was conducted in December 2020, and a third wave in June 2021.

The third wave of the study consists of a survey of 5,913 Canadians age 18 and over, conducted between June 1 and June 28, 2021, in all provinces and territories. It was conducted both online (in the provinces) and by telephone (in the territories). This wave of the survey includes oversamples of Canadians living in smaller provinces and territories, those under the age of 34, racialized Canadians and Canadians who identify as Indigenous, in order to provide a better portrait of the range of experiences across the country. The survey results in this report are weighted by age, gender, region, education, racial identity and Indigenous identity, to ensure that they are representative of the Canadian population as whole.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the clearest directives from public health officials has been that people should stay home and avoid contact with others when they are feeling sick. For workers, staying home from work at the first sign of a symptom is one of the simplest steps they can take to limit the spread of the virus.

In practice, staying home from work is not that easy. Not all employees have access to paid sick leave, meaning that missing a day or shift of work has financial consequences. And many of those who have the option of taking a paid sick day may nonetheless be reluctant to do so because of a workplace culture that is not conducive to taking time off.

This issue was explored in the third wave of the Survey on Employment and Skills, which took place in June 2021.

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Summary

The pandemic has drawn attention to the need for those feeling sick to self-isolate to avoid spreading the COVID-19 virus. But this study confirms that, prior to the pandemic, only two in five Canadian workers would likely have called in sick and stayed home from work if they woke up on a workday feeling a little sick (like they might be getting a cold or the flu). And even during the pandemic, two in five Canadian workers who have been to their workplace have done so at least once when they were feeling sick.

Access to paid sick days is an important factor in explaining why some workers go into work despite feeling sick, and others do not. Among those who say they would likely have gone into work anyway despite feeling sick (prior to the pandemic), two in five say it was because they had to show up for work, or else they wouldn't get paid for that day. Conversely, a majority of those who would choose to stay home from work when sick report that they would still have gotten paid.

Nonetheless, lack of sick days is not the most common reason why some workers go into work despite feeling sick. More say it is because other people depend on them to be there to do their jobs, and they don't want to let them down. Many also say they go into work sick because they have so much work to do and don't want to fall behind. Workplace culture, including a sense of obligation to one's job or co-workers, is thus

an equally, if not more, important factor than access to sick days in explaining why some choose to go into work despite feeling sick.

Job security clearly translates into the ability to take time off when sick. Less securely employed workers (including part-time workers; workers with jobs related to trades, transportation or manual labour, or to sales or services; non-permanent employees; workers earning lower incomes; and workers without a university degree) are much more likely than average to say they would likely go into work sick because otherwise they would not get paid. Those more securely employed (including full-time and permanent employees), as well as men, those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents, and those who are not racialized, are more likely to report that they would still get paid when staying home from work due to illness. Yet more securely employed workers are also more likely to give a reason other than lack of sick days for going into work sick, such as saying they had so much work to do and didn't want to fall behind.


Efforts to improve public health and contain the spread of serious illness therefore must focus on both the lack of paid sick days for many workers and the behaviour of those who have access to paid sick days but choose not to use them because of the prevailing workplace culture.


Going to work or staying home from work when sick (prior to the pandemic)

 **100%** 
Employed Canadians who were
not working from home

What would happen if you woke up on a workday feeling a little sick
(like you might be getting a cold or the flu)?

 **51%**
I would go to work
anyway


 **42%**
I would stay home
from work


 **7%**
Don't know


Why would you have
gone into work even if
you were feeling sick?

If you did not go into work
because you were feeling
sick, would you still get paid
for work that day?

 **43%**
Because I had to
show up for
work, or else I
wouldn't get
paid for that day

 **57%**
Another
reason

 **57%**
Yes, I would
still get paid

 **36%**
No, I would
not get paid

 **7%**
Don't know


Summary (adds to 100%)


22%
Go to work sick
Because no
paid sick days


29%
Go to work sick
Another reason


24%
Stay home
Still get paid


15%
Stay home
Do not get paid


10%
Don't know

Source: Environics Institute, *Survey on Employment and Skills* (Wave 3, June 2021)

Going into work when feeling sick (prior to the pandemic)

One in two employed Canadians say they would likely have gone into work if they woke up on a workday feeling a little sick (prior to the pandemic).

Before the onset of the pandemic, how many workers in Canada were likely to go into work despite feeling sick?

The Survey on Employment and Skills asked Canadians who were employed what they would have done, prior to the pandemic, had they woken up on a workday feeling a little sick (like they might be getting a cold or the flu).¹ Only 42 percent say they would likely have called in sick and stayed home. Conversely, one in two (51%) say they

would likely have gone into work anyway (an additional 7 percent did not say either way).

There is surprisingly little difference in the answers to this question among different groups of workers. About one in two full-time, part-time, and self-employed workers say they would likely have gone into work on a day when they woke up feeling sick, as do the same proportion of those who are and those who are not members of a labour union. There is little difference by gender, occupation, education or income. There is also little difference by age, with the exception that the proportion that says they would have stayed home if they were sick is higher among those age 60 or older.



¹ This question was not asked to those who were working from home prior to the pandemic.

There are some exceptions to this pattern, however. First generation (55%) and second generation (43%) immigrants are more likely than those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents (37%) to say they would have called in sick, as are racialized workers (52%) compared to those who identify as white (38%).

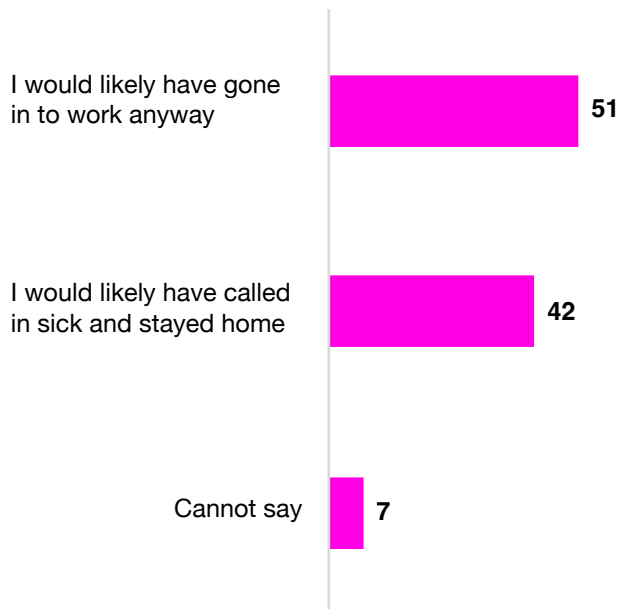
Overall, what is striking is that the likelihood of going into work sick is not dramatically

greater among those who are more likely to be disadvantaged in the workplace. Part-time workers, workers in service and sales occupations, low-income workers, younger workers, immigrant and racialized workers, and those who are not union members are not more likely than average to say that, prior to the pandemic, they would likely have gone into work on a day when they woke up feeling sick.

Do Canadians go into work when they are sick?

Subsample: employed Canadians who were not working from home prior to the pandemic

Before the pandemic, what would happen if you woke up on a work day feeling sick?



Q.33f. And now thinking about the time before the pandemic, which of the following best describes what would happen if you woke up on a work day feeling a little sick (like you might be getting a cold or the flu).

Access to paid sick days

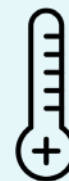
Most of those who would not go into work if they felt sick say they would still have been paid for work that day. However, a significant minority would not have been paid. The likelihood of being paid while off sick varies significantly between those who are and who are not more likely to be advantaged in the workplace.

Those who would not go into work were asked if they would still have been paid for work that day. The majority said they would: 57 percent of those who would stay home if they were sick say that they would still get paid for the day. But a significant minority (36%) indicated that they would not. Thus, more than one in three workers who opt to stay home from work do so despite a loss of wages.

While the likelihood of going into work sick does not differ dramatically between those who are and who are not more likely to be advantaged in the workplace, the likelihood of being paid while staying home sick definitely does (see Appendix Table 1). Among those who say they would stay home from work if, prior to the pandemic, they woke up on a workday feeling a little sick:

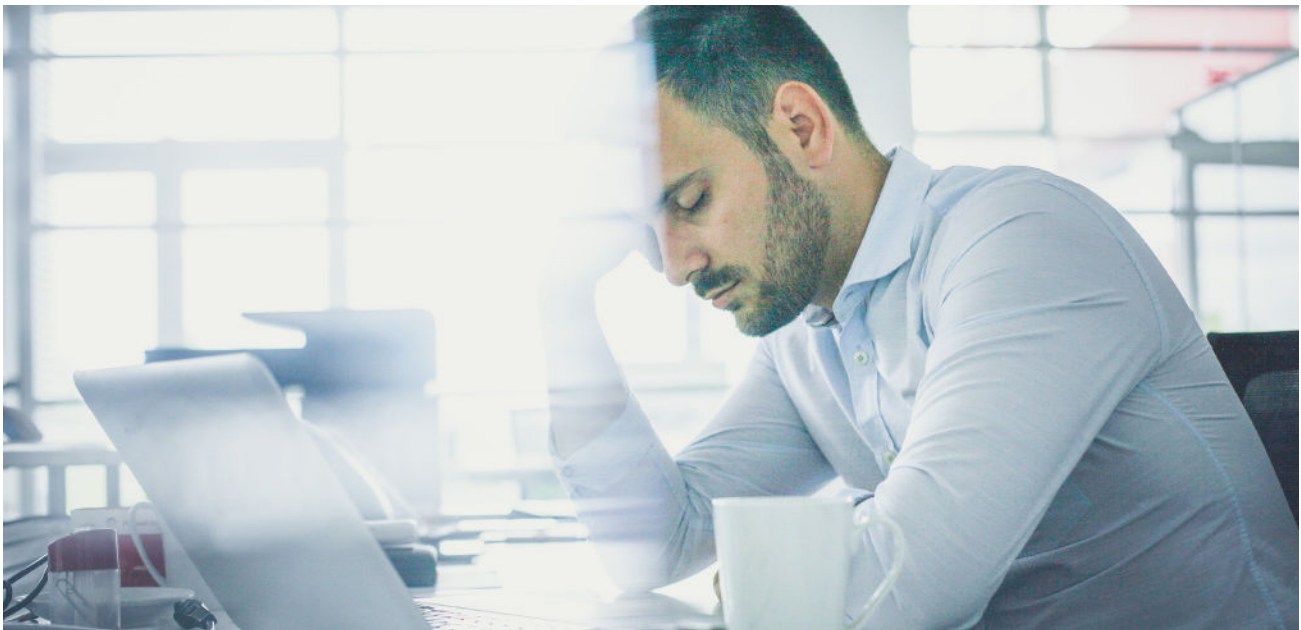
> Full-time workers (67%) are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to part-time workers (34%) and self-employed workers (31%).

- > Those who are employed on a permanent basis (62%) are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to those employed on a seasonal, temporary or casual basis (34%).
- > Those with office or clerical jobs (70%) and professionals and executives (69%) are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to those with jobs related to trades, transportation or manual labour (54%) or to sales or services (37%).



*Those who are employed on a permanent basis (62%) are **much more likely** to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to those employed on a seasonal, temporary or casual basis (34%).*

- > Union members (71%) are much more likely than non-members (52%) to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick.
- > Those with annual household incomes of over \$100,000 (72%) are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to those with incomes between \$60,000 and \$99,999 (58%) and those with incomes below \$60,000 (43%).
- > Those with a university degree (64%) or college diploma (66%) are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick, compared to those with trades or apprenticeship training (53%) and those who did not continue their formal education past high school (45%).
- > Older workers are much more likely to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick: this is the case for 65 percent of those age 35 or older, compared to 43 percent of those age 18 to 24, and 47 percent of those age 25 to 34.
- > Those born in Canada to Canadian-born parents (62%) are somewhat more likely than first generation (54%) and second generation (50%) immigrants to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick.
- > Those who identify as white (61%) are somewhat more likely than those who are racialized (52%) to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick.
- > Men (62%) are more likely than women (51%) to say they would still get paid if they stayed home from work when sick.



Reasons for going into work when feeling sick

The most common reason why someone feeling sick might have gone into work anyway is that other people depended on them to be there to do their job, and they didn't want to let them down. However, almost as many said it was because they had to show up for work, or else they wouldn't get paid for that day. Those less securely employed are much more likely than average to say they would go into work sick because they would otherwise not get paid.

A different question was asked of those who said they would likely have gone into work anyway if, prior to the pandemic, they woke up on a workday feeling a little sick. Workers in this case were asked to choose one or more of a number of reasons that might explain why they would have done this.

The most common reason why someone feeling sick might have gone into work anyway is that other people depended on them to be there to do their job, and they didn't want to let them down: 46 percent selected this reason. However, almost as many (43%) said it was because they had to show up for work, or else they wouldn't get paid for that day.²

The next most common reason for workers going into work despite feeling sick is that they had so much work to do and didn't want to fall behind (33%). Less common reasons include that they felt pressured by their boss to keep working (18%); they didn't want other people at work to think that they weren't able to do their job (15%); they would feel bored or unproductive if they stayed at home (13%); and they didn't have the equipment that they needed to get some work done or stay connected to the office while they were home sick (7%).

Because more than one reason could be selected, there is some overlap between responses. A look at two possible combinations of reasons shows that, prior to the pandemic:

- > 62 percent of workers who say that they would likely go into work despite feeling sick say this would be either because they didn't want to let down other people who depended on them, or they didn't want to fall behind on all the work they had to do (or both).
- > 52 percent say this would be either because otherwise they would not get paid, or because they felt pressured by their boss to keep working (or both).

In short, while lack of sick days or job security are important reasons why some people might go into work despite feeling sick, other factors related to work culture, including a sense of obligation to one's job or co-workers, are equally if not more important.

2 Note that 17 percent selected both of these reasons.

Not surprisingly, the reasons for going into work sick vary significantly among different types of workers. Specifically, those less securely employed are much more likely than average to say they would go into work sick because otherwise they would not get paid. This includes:

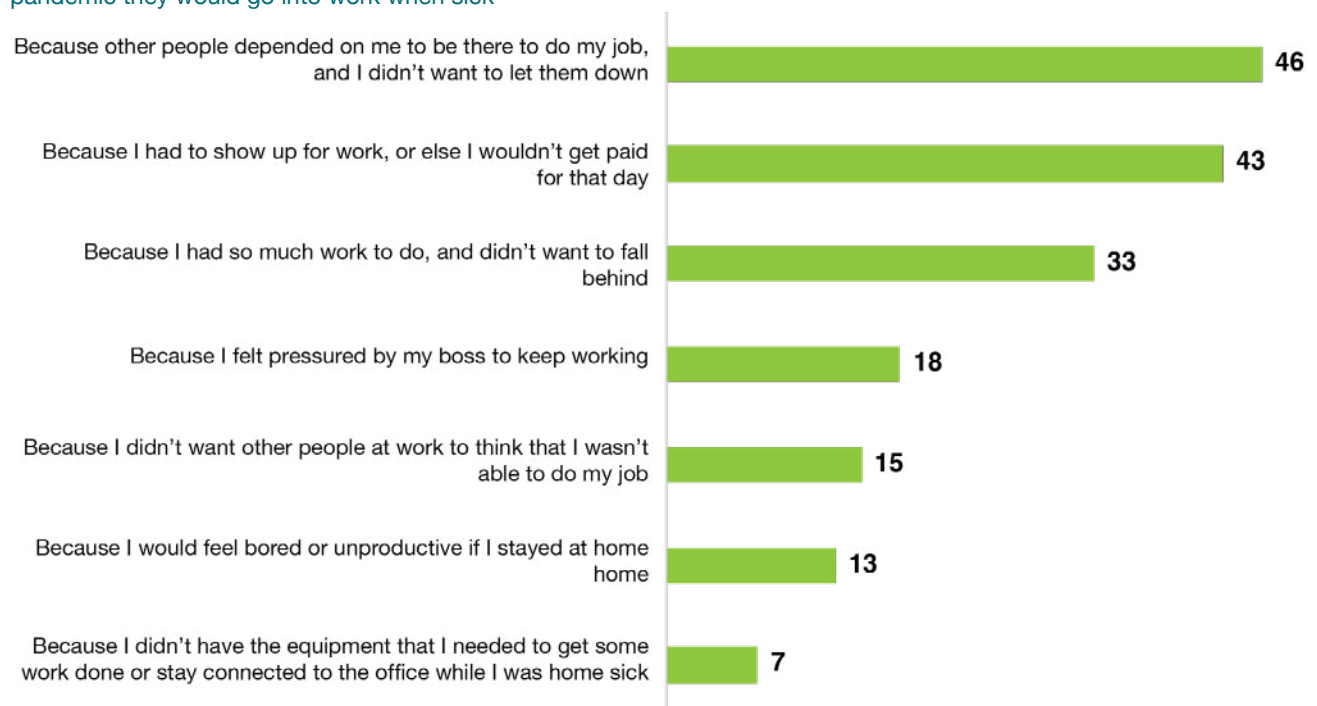
- > Part-time workers, who are more likely to mention lack of paid sick days (55%) than those employed full-time (40%) and those who are self-employed (34%).
- > Those with jobs related to sales or services (55%) or to trades, transportation or manual labour (54%), compared to those with office or clerical jobs (38%) and professionals and executives (29%).
- > Those employed on a seasonal, temporary or casual basis (49%), compared to those with a permanent job (41%).

- > Those with annual household incomes below \$60,000 (55%), compared to those with incomes between \$60,000 and \$99,999 (36%) and those with incomes of over \$100,000 (35%).
- > Those who did not continue their formal education past high school (48%), those with trades or apprenticeship training (49%) and those who earned a college diploma (44%), compared to those with a university degree (32%).

Notably, the types of workers who are more likely to say that they would go into work sick because otherwise they wouldn't get paid are similar to the types of workers who are less likely to say they would get paid when staying home sick. This includes part-time workers; workers with jobs related to trades, transportation or manual labour, or to sales or services; non-permanent employees; workers earning lower incomes; and workers without a university degree.

Reasons for going into work when sick

Subsample: employed Canadians who were not working from home prior to the pandemic and who say that prior to the pandemic they would go into work when sick



Q.33g. Why would you have gone into work even if you were feeling sick?

While, among those would go into work sick, those less securely employed are much more likely than average to do so because otherwise they would not get paid, those more securely employed are more likely to give another reason. For instance, the proportion that says they would go into work sick because they had so much work to do and didn't want to fall behind, is much higher among those with a college diploma or university degree, those with annual household incomes of over \$100,000, professionals and executives, and those with office or clerical jobs. This reason is much less likely to be given by those employed on a part-time basis.

Men and women who would go into work when feeling sick are equally likely to say this is because they did not have paid sick days, but there are some modest differences when it comes to other reasons. Women (51%) are more likely than men (41%) to say that they would go into work because other people depended on them to be there to do their job, and they didn't want to let them down. Women (22%) are also slightly more likely than men (15%) to say that they would go into work because they felt pressured by their boss to keep working, and to say they would do so because they didn't want other people at work to think that they weren't able to do their job (this reason is given by 19% of women and 11% of men). Conversely, men (15%) are slightly more likely than women (11%) to say that they would go into work because they would feel bored or unproductive if they stayed at home.



Going into work when feeling sick (during the pandemic)

Despite the efforts of public health officials to emphasize the importance of self-isolating when feeling ill, two in five Canadians workers who have been to their workplace in the past year have done so at least once when they were feeling sick.

The results presented in this report so far refer to the situation prior to the pandemic. Perhaps in the current context, with the attention given to the risks of spreading the virus, fewer workers would contemplate going into work sick?

In June 2021, employed Canadians were asked whether, in the past year, they had ever gone into their workplace when they were feeling sick. Leaving aside those who had not attended their workplace because they were working from home, a majority (59%) say they have never done this. However, 38 percent say they have, either several times (19%) or only rarely (20%).³ This is an important finding, not only in the immediate context of the pandemic, but also in terms of planning for the economic recovery. Despite the efforts of public health officials to emphasize the importance of self-isolating when feeling ill, two in five Canadians workers who have been to their

workplace in the past year have done so at least once when they were feeling sick.

Once again, the likelihood of going into work when feeling sick varies among different groups of workers (see Appendix Table 2). In this case, the likelihood is higher among younger workers; those with office or clerical jobs or with jobs in sales or services; and those with lower household incomes. It is also higher among those who are worried about themselves or a member of their immediate family finding or keeping a stable, full-time job.

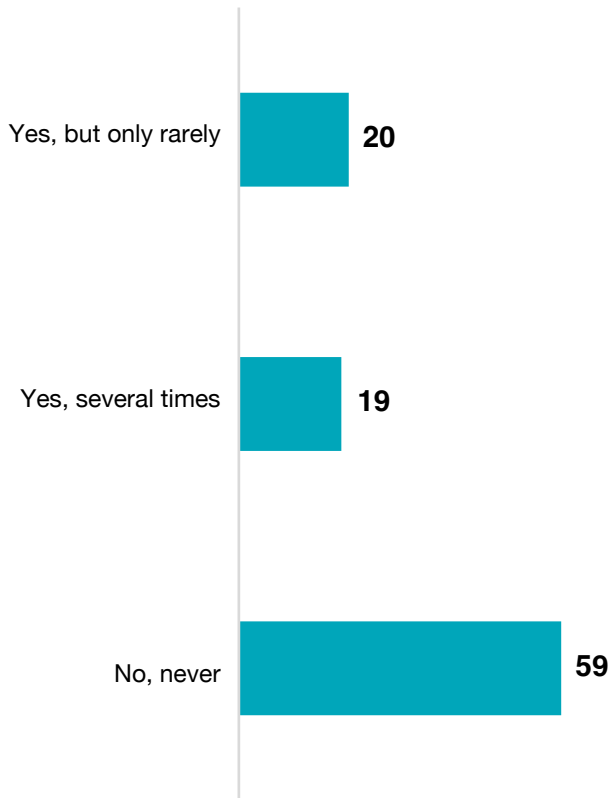


Despite the efforts of public health officials to emphasize the importance of self-isolating when feeling ill, two in five Canadians workers who have been to their workplace in the past year have done so at least once when they were feeling sick.

3 As noted, the results presented in this section exclude those who indicated that they had not gone into their workplace because they have been working from home (12 percent of the original total).

Going into work when sick, during the pandemic

Subsample: employed Canadians, excluding those who have not attended their workplace during the pandemic



Q.33e. In the past year, have you ever gone into your workplace when you were feeling sick?

Conclusions and implications for public policy

It is important to shine a light on the lack of paid sick days for many workers, including those less securely employed, without deflecting attention from the behaviour of those who have access to paid sick days but choose not to use them because of their commitment to their jobs or co-workers.

The recurring waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have underlined the cost of overlooking public health guidelines, including the stipulation that those feeling ill should self-isolate at home. Workers who go into work sick risk further spreading the COVID-19 virus or other illnesses.

This report confirms that access to paid sick days is an important factor in explaining why some workers might go into work despite feeling sick, and others might not. One in two workers report that (prior to the pandemic) they would typically go into work if they were feeling a bit sick, and among these, two in five explain that they would do so because otherwise they would not get paid. Combined, this group represents 22 percent of employed Canadians. Conversely, just over two in five report that they would typically stay home from work if they were feeling a bit sick, and among these, more than one in two say they would still get paid.

Combined, this group represents 24 percent of employed Canadians.⁴

Of course, the profile of these two groups is quite different. Those who are more likely to go into work sick because otherwise they would not get paid include part-time workers; those working in sales or service occupations or in jobs relating to trades, transportation and manual labour; those with lower incomes; those working on a non-permanent basis; and those without a college diploma or university degree. Those who are more likely to stay home from work when sick while still getting paid include full-time workers; those working in professional or executive positions or in office or clerical jobs; those with higher incomes; those working on a permanent basis; union members; and those with a college diploma or university degree. In short, job security clearly translates into the ability to take time off when sick; job insecurity therefore has consequences for public health.

Yet access to sick days is only part of the story, as many Canadians go into work sick even though they have access to paid sick days. In fact, the most common reason why Canadians go into work despite feeling sick is a sense of responsibility to their job and coworkers, not because they need to work in order to get paid. Many also keep working because they don't want to fall further behind in their workload.

These reasons are just as, or sometimes more, likely to be expressed by those more securely employed, suggesting that the issue is not so much fear of direct reprimand, but either a genuine commitment to the job or a desire to avoid showing weakness or an inability to keep up with others in the office.

⁴ These figures do not include workers who were already working from home prior to the pandemic.

The issue, in these cases, has more to do with the prevailing work culture than with benefits or protections in the workplace.

Addressing the issue of a workplace culture that encourages people to come into the workplace when feeling sick will not be easy, because those concerned do not necessarily see this as a problem. Those who go into work sick either because of a sense of responsibility to their job and coworkers, or to keep up with their workload, do not express lower job satisfaction, or say they have more difficulty finding a balance between their work and their personal life, or report poorer mental health. In this sense, public health directives appear to be pushing against the prevailing tide: maybe people don't stay home from work when sick because they don't really want to (or they perceive that the non-financial benefits of continuing to work, such as being seen as committed or dependable, outweigh the benefits of staying home). Changing this work culture ultimately may prove more challenging than changing labour regulations relating to paid sick days.



*Yet access to sick days is only part of the story, as many Canadians go into work sick **even though they have access to paid sick days.***

Experiences of working from home gained during the pandemic may help in this regard: employers can equip workers with the means to connect from home and accommodate remote access to workplace meetings (at least in cases where workers are symptomatic but nonetheless feeling well enough to work; this should not be used to prevent unwell workers from getting the rest they need to recover). Employers, managers and work colleagues can all be part of the solution, spreading the word that, when someone is sick, staying home will earn them more respect and admiration than coming into work.

Ultimately, it is important to shine a light on the lack of paid sick days for many workers, including those less securely employed, without deflecting attention from the behaviour of those who have access to paid sick days but choose not to use them because of their commitment to their jobs or co-workers. Workers and employers of all types should be held to the same standard, and the expectation that people stay home when sick without losing pay should be normalized across all sectors and professions.

Appendix

TABLE 1

Access to paid sick days (prior to the pandemic)

Q33h. If you did not go into work because you were feeling sick, did you still get paid for work that day? (Subsample: employed Canadians who were not working from home prior to the pandemic who say they would <u>not</u> have gone into their workplace when feeling sick)					
Type of employee		Yes, I still got paid when I stayed home from work because I was sick	No, I did not get paid when I stayed home from work because I was sick	Cannot say	
Average		57	36	7	
Gender	Men	62	32	6	
	Women	51	41	8	
Age	18 to 34	45	48	7	
	35 to 54	64	28	8	
	55+	67	29	3	
Occupation	Sales or services	37	55	8	
	Trades, transportation or labour	54	40	6	
	Office or clerical	70	23	7	
	Professional or executive	69	26	5	
Employment status	Employed full-time	67	27	6	
	Employed part-time	34	61	5	
	Self-employed	31	54	15	

Employment type	Permanent	62	32	7
	Seasonal, temporary or casual	34	60	5
Union membership	Member	71	26	3
	Non-member	52	40	8
Annual household income	Less than \$60,000	43	49	9
	\$60,000 to \$99,999	58	36	5
	\$100,000+	72	23	6
Education	High school or less	45	46	8
	Trades or apprenticeship	53	44	3
	College	66	26	8
	University	64	32	5
Identity	Non-racialized (white)	61	32	7
	Racialized	52	42	6
Generation in Canada	First generation immigrant	54	40	6
	Second generation immigrant	50	43	7
	Third generation plus	62	31	7

TABLE 2**Going into work when feeling sick (during the pandemic)**

Q33e. In the past year, have you ever gone into your workplace when you were feeling sick? (Subsample: employed Canadians, excluding those who have not gone into their workplace because they have been working from home)						
Type of employee		Yes (either rarely or several times)	Yes, but only rarely	Yes, several times	No, never	No response
Average		38	20	19	59	3
Age	18 to 34	44	23	22	53	3
	35 to 54	36	18	18	61	3
	55+	29	18	12	69	2
Occupation	Office or clerical	45	26	19	53	2
	Sales or services	46	23	23	52	2
	Professional or executive	34	18	16	65	1
	Trades, transportation or labour	34	15	19	64	3
Annual household income	Less than \$60,000	44	26	18	53	3
	\$60,000 to \$99,999	36	15	20	62	3
	\$100,000+	33	17	16	65	1
Employment type	Permanent	37	20	17	60	3
	Seasonal, temporary or casual	44	22	22	54	2
Worry about member of their immediate family finding or keeping a stable, full-time job	Very or somewhat worried	48	23	25	51	2
	Not very or not at all worried	32	18	14	66	2

